



HAWTHORNE  
Fine Art

**HENRY KIRKE BROWN (1814—1886)**

*Classical Woman*, 1851

Oil on paper

7 7/8 x 5 3/8 inches

Signed and inscribed (verso): Lara A. Delano/painted & presented/by H.K. Brown 1865;

Estate of Margaret Truman

Dated (recto): 1851

**Provenance:**

The artist (1851—65)

His gift to Lara A. Delano (from 1865)

Estate of Margaret Truman

[Private collection]

Private collection, Rhode Island (their gift from above, until 2017)

Purchased from above

Henry Kirke Brown was a pioneer of American sculpture. Unlike other sculptors from his time, Brown rejected the dominant neoclassical influence that emanated from Rome and instead embraced unequivocally American subject matter. Highly regarded during his lifetime, Brown's work remains an emblem of the American spirit, his work fixtures in parks, museums, and universities throughout the country.

Brown was born on a farm in Leyden, Massachusetts. In 1832, at the age of 18, he began to study painting in Boston with the portraitist Chester Harding (1792—1866), and travelled a few years later to Vermont to study anatomy at the Woodstock Medical College. By 1836, he was painting in Cincinnati, and beginning to experiment with modeling clay, perhaps at the suggestion of his friend, the sculptor Shobal Clevenger (1812—1843). Brown married



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Lydia Louise Udall of Vermont in 1839 and moved back to Boston, during which time he made several extended trips to Albany and Troy, New York to model no less than forty portrait busts of civic leaders. Due to the difficulties involved in producing marble and bronze sculpture in the United States at the time, these works were cast in plaster. Hoping to produce them in marble, Brown and his wife travelled to Florence, Italy in 1842. The couple quickly became prominent members of the active Anglo-American expatriate community there. They relocated to Rome in 1843, where they remained until 1846, when they returned to the United States.

During his four years in Rome, Brown studied Italianate neoclassical drawing and sculpture. Indeed, he reworked an existing plaster of a Native American youth that he had brought with him from the United States, transforming it into an Apollino. Brown recorded his feelings about this act in a letter to his friend, Ezra P. Prentice of Albany:

...changed the state to an Apollino . . . hence, the poor Indian boy is like many others of his race, no more; I here record his name for the last time, but not without the hope of some day doing better justice to his memory by making another statue of him on his own native soil, where I shall be able to gather together the proper material for the story . . . Now, though I joke about it Mr. P., I feel, that if I live to return to this subject, for I do esteem it as one capable of a high poetical character.<sup>1</sup>

Brown returned to the United States two years later, strongly believing that an American sculptor could not create truly American art when surrounded by the overwhelming influence of Roman art. He officially eschewed the expatriate community—the first American artist to do so—and established a studio in New York City where he became a key figure in its burgeoning arts scene. He abandoned the Italianate subject matter that he had adopted in Rome and concentrated on local political figures, military heroes, and romanticized depictions of Native Americans, such as the one that he sacrificed to neoclassical influences which he described in his letter to Prentice. He often enlisted his neoclassical drawings as a means of growing his reputation, usually as gifts to potential

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Kirke Brown to Ezra P. Prentice, June 15, 1844, quoted in Wayne Craven, “Henry Kirke Brown: His Search for an American Art in the 1840’s,” in *American Art Journal* 4 (November 1972): 45.



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collectors or commissioners of his work. This classical figure study, which Brown executed in 1851 and gifted to Lara A. Delano in 1865, was most likely used in this capacity.

In a warm palette of golds and reds, Brown's neoclassical woman holds up a small weaving board. Her head is bowed to her work, as she pulls a long thread through its weft. She is wearing typical Roman garb, a form of tunic in which a *peplos* is layered over a longer *chiton*, a style that allowed for greater fashion options while still providing much needed ventilation for Rome's hot weather. Ensclosed in a corner, she is unaware of her viewer, instead contained within the small neoclassical world the Brown created on the paper. She could easily have been pulled from the many bas-reliefs that abound throughout Rome.

While scholars praise Brown as pioneering a truly American subject matter, they also acknowledge that his aesthetic often remained reliant on neoclassical ideals. Indeed, even the scholar Wayne Craven, who most ardently argues for Brown's untainted American style, admits that his statue of a mounted George Washington in Manhattan's Union Square resembles the famous equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in Rome.



Henry Kirke Brown, *George Washington*, 1865, Union Square, Manhattan.



Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius, Campidoglio, Rome, Italy.



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His first solo exhibition at the National Academy of Design—the first American solo exhibition of sculpture—betrayed his continuing reliance on neoclassical forms. This show earned him the position of Associate member; he was also a founding member of the Century Club. These associations led to close and productive friendships with other major American artists such as Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, and William Cullen Bryant.

He moved his studio to Brooklyn in 1848, where he had enough room to open a makeshift foundry to execute statuettes that were distributed nationally through a lottery system organized by the American Art Union. His monument to Dewitt Clinton, executed shortly after, solidified his national reputation. Brown moved his studio and foundry once again to upstate New York in 1856. In 1859, President James Buchanan appointed him to the National Art Commission that advised Congress on decorations for the nation's capitol. This commission was dissolved at the onset of the Civil War; Brown's models created for this commission were subsequently destroyed during the war.

In the last two decades of his life, Brown executed numerous public monuments: two statues of Abraham Lincoln (Prospect Park, Brooklyn and Union Square, Manhattan); two equestrian statues of General Winfield Scott (Washington D.C.); and four statues for the Capitol's National Statuary Hall (*Nathaniel Greene, George Clinton, Philip Kearney, and Richard Stockton*). While his realist style was eclipsed by the younger American sculptors who were trained at Paris' Ecole des Beaux-Arts, his work remains highly regarded in private collections and major museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, Texas. Indeed, this figure study was once in the collection of Margaret Truman, the daughter of President Truman, who was both a best-selling author and acclaimed patron of the arts. His work, which reflect the national ideals of his time, endure today.

### **Selected Bibliography:**



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